



VOICES FROM TRANS COMMUNITIES IN CHINA

SUMMARY REPORT OF THREE CONSULTATIONS

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**VOICES FROM TRANS COMMUNITIES IN CHINA: SUMMARY REPORT
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FOREWORD

We are delighted to introduce this report summarizing results of community consultations held with trans people in China in 2016. These “Town Hall-style” consultations took place in the cities of Beijing and Ningbo in Mainland China. This report cannot capture the whole complexity and diversity of trans communities in China. However, it is a reflection of the issues voiced by the trans participants in the three consultations, with limited time, space, resources, and representation. 2016 was an important year for the visibility of trans communities in Mainland China: the term “trans” became widely used on social media, and new and emerging trans, and trans-led organizations set down roots.

This report was developed by Asia Catalyst in collaboration with Young Tree, Trans Center, and QHumanity in an effort to understand the needs of Mainland China’s trans communities and to inform a curriculum development strategy. This program emerged organically from earlier work in the LGBT communities, where it became clear that trans-related issues were under-addressed. While lesbian and gay communities tend to be resourced and able to create organizations and momentum for themselves, the “T” in LGBT has not been consistently included in the movement. There is an urgent need to support the building of a stronger trans community in order to be able to respond to the numerous challenges daily faced by trans people in Mainland China. Asia Catalyst, with ten years of close collaboration with LGBT communities, could not stand by in silence when clear needs from trans communities have been articulated. This is one small step towards promoting visibility, respect, and equality for trans people in China.

We hope this report can help break new ground and improve the understanding of the multitude of challenges faced by trans communities in China, and that partnerships and collaborations within the broader activist communities will produce excellent results for a brighter future.

This report is dedicated to trans people in China.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our warmest gratitude to the organizations, individual activists, advocates, and community members who have directly or indirectly contributed to the development of this report. Some organizations have chosen to remain anonymous and, although not mentioned below, we wish to thank them for helping make this project happen.

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Partner organizations

These are the organizations that have given their time and effort to organize the consultations:

Young Tree (Beijing, China): Young Tree is a volunteer group dedicated to empowering female-assigned trans and gender non-conforming people in China. Young Tree's current projects include a surgery documentary, community survey, and hormone guide. Through education and advocacy, Young Tree is committed to promoting gender diversity and gender justice.

Trans Center (Guangzhou, China): Trans Center is a trans-led feminist organization founded in May 2016. Trans Center aims at achieving equal rights, access to social resources, and elimination of all forms of discrimination against trans people. It advocates for trans people, empowers trans people, and opposes violence against trans people by action, educational activities, and rescuing trans youth from homelessness.

QHumanity: QHumanity envisions themselves as an organization that facilitates the breaking down of barriers that impede embracing a diverse society.

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Their rainbow bridge empathetically connects diverse groups, grassroots movements, activists, NGOs, researchers, and other organizations to facilitate continuous learning through education, research, and innovation.

Supporting organization

We would like to thank TGEU for supporting the project through facilitating some of the third consultation sessions, contributing to the development of the program, and providing feedback for this report.

Transgender Europe (TGEU) is a membership-based organization established in 2005 and with currently 105 members from 42 European countries. TGEU advocates for trans rights and has a leading role in raising awareness within European and international institutions on trans-related issues. One of its initiatives, the Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide (TvT) research project, provides an overview of the human rights situation of trans and/or gender-diverse people in different parts of the world in order to create comparative data and advocacy tools for organizations and activists.

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TERMINOLOGY AND ACRONYMS

The definitions below are not meant to be rigid, but to provide some common terms in English related to trans people, gender identity, and gender expression. Trans people may or may not use these particular terms to describe themselves. Many of the definitions were adapted from the Asia and the Pacific Trans Health Blueprint.¹

Cis/Cisgender: Adjective used for people whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender: Refers to the socially-constructed attitudes, feelings, and behaviors associated with binary concepts of sex assigned at birth. They vary from society to society and can change over time.

Gender-affirming health services: An umbrella term that encompasses any of the biomedical, surgical, or health interventions a trans person may undertake to physically transition. This includes, for example, access to counseling, hormone therapy, hair removal, and a range of surgeries. The term “gender-affirming surgeries” is preferred rather than the older term “sex reassignment surgery.”

Gender expression: A person’s ways of communicating culturally-defined traits of masculinity or femininity (or both or neither) externally through physical appearance (including clothing, accessories, hair styles, and the use of cosmetics), mannerisms, ways of speaking, and behavioral patterns in interactions with others.

Gender identity: A person’s internal, deeply felt individual sense of being a man, a woman, both, neither, some alternative gender, or combination of genders, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

¹UNDP and Asia-Pacific Transgender Network (APTAN), Blueprint for the Provision of Comprehensive Care For Trans People and Trans Communities in Asia and the Pacific (2015), accessed March 1, 2017, http://www.healthpolicyproject.com/pubs/484_APTBFINAL.pdf

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Gender non-conforming: Adjective that can be used to describe a person who has or is perceived to have a gender expression or identity that does not conform to societal expectations of gender.

Intersectionality: “Intersectionality [...] posits that multiple social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism).”²

Intersex: A term used to describe people whose sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, gonads, and genitals) do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. Some intersex people may identify as trans, whereas others may not.

Misgendering: Treating someone by a gender that is not theirs. This takes many forms, for instance, referring to someone using the incorrect pronouns.

LGBT: Adjective acronym referred to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans.

MSM: Men who have sex with men. Men who engage in sexual behavior with other men, but do not necessarily identify as “gay”, “homosexual”, or “bisexual”.

Sex assigned at birth: The sex to which a person is assigned at birth, and usually based on genitalia. This assignment may or may not accord with the individual’s gender identity.

Sex worker: An adult of any gender who engages in commercial sex consensually (that is, voluntarily).

²Bowleg, Lisa, “The Problem With the Phrase Women and Minorities: Intersectionality—an Important Theoretical Framework for Public Health,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102(7) (2012): 1267.

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SOGIE: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression.

Trans/Transgender/TG: “Trans” is a Latin prefix that does not only mean “on the other side,” but also “beyond.” It is an umbrella term to refer to persons whose gender identity and/or expression differ from the social roles, norms, and expectations associated to the sex they were assigned at birth. In this report, the term “trans” includes trans men, trans women, as well as gender non-binary, gender non-conforming, and genderqueer identities.

Transition: The individual process many, but not all, trans people undergo of transitioning towards one’s gender identity. Transitioning may include, but does not require, any of the following: talking family, friends, and acquaintances, changing one’s pronouns, wearing different clothing than before, altering one’s name and legal gender marker, and/or undergoing physical modifications such as hormones and surgery.

Trans man: A man who is also trans. (i.e., someone whose sex assigned at birth was female but who identifies as a man). The acronym FtM (Female to Male) is also used to describe a trans man.

Trans woman: A woman who is also trans (i.e., someone whose sex assigned at birth was male but who identifies as a woman). The acronym MtF (Male to Female) is also used to describe a trans woman.

Transphobia: Prejudice, stigma, or discrimination against trans, non-binary, genderqueer and/or gender-diverse people. Can occur as both an individual attitude and as part of widespread social and institutional structures.

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I. BACKGROUND

An increasing number of trans-led grassroots organizations have established themselves in recent years, providing community services such as creating support groups and peer counseling on- and offline, as well as organizing public education events in schools and workplaces. More and more trans activists are also engaging with the media. Differing amounts of information are available in different regions in China, and very little published literature about trans communities is available. While there is much resilience in the increasingly visible communities, trans people in Mainland China still face discrimination and violence in a variety of ways. Institutionalized transphobia and social value systems that fuel negative attitudes and beliefs contribute to the already-difficult endeavor of living openly as a trans person in China. Some articles exist in Chinese law that address anti-discrimination but gender identity is not a criteria that is included³. To make matters worse, it is extremely challenging to start dialogues and advocacy that would encourage legal change due to the restrictive political attitudes. The unofficial line for the general LGBT movement matters is one of denial: not encouraging, not discouraging, and not promoting (bú zhīchí, bú fǎnduì, bú tíchàng, 不支持, 不反对, 不提倡).⁴⁵

Confucianism and traditional family values are deeply rooted in Chinese society, and gender roles are rigidly and clearly distinct. Confucian moral concepts, such as filial piety, especially in rural areas and/or areas with less access to education, make it difficult to break the norms of socialized gender. In a previous project Asia Catalyst collected lived stories of trans people about going back to their family homes. As shared by trans woman Binbin:⁶

³Yao, Christy, "Chinese transgender man wins landmark wrongful dismissal case," The Guardian, January 3, 2017, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/03/transgender-man-in-china-wins-wrongful-dismissal-case>.

⁴Tom Mountford, The Legal Position and Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in the People's Republic of China, (2010), accessed May 31, 2017, <https://www.outrightinternational.org/content/china-legal-position-and-status-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people-people%E2%80%99s>.

⁵Human Rights Council. "Human Rights Council adopts resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity and concludes twenty-seventh session," OHCHR, September 26, 2014, accessed December 13, 2016, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15109&LangID=E>

⁶Asia Catalyst, My Life is too Dark to see the Light: A Survey of the Living Conditions of Transgender Female Sex Workers in Beijing and Shanghai (2015), accessed February 15, 2017. <http://asiacatalyst.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Asia-Catalyst-TG-SW-Report.pdf>

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Going back home is really inconvenient. I can't wear makeup. I have to pin back my hair and put it under a hat. I haven't dared have large breast implants; I've kept them small so they can't be seen under my clothes. When the time comes, I just strap them down and wear loose shirts.

This report aims at understanding the priorities of the community and finding a direction for moving forward. Overall, the social and legal state of trans people that should be granted is the right to legally change their gender and/or name on official documents. Mainland China does allow trans people to legally change their gender on their ID card and most official documents. However, there are many requirements, and gender-affirming surgery is compulsory. Dr. Sam Winter presented a comprehensive summary of what changing one's gender marker on official documents actually means for trans people:

(...) in China requirements include gender affirming surgery, living and working in the gender that matches the new anatomy, informing direct relatives, divorcing if married, and being free of any criminal record. This presents a serious problem for many trans* people. Employment discrimination against trans* people is common, and sex work may often be the only way of earning money for surgery.⁷

In order to be able to access gender-affirming surgery, trans people must provide a certificate from a mental healthcare professional that would prove their “transsexualism” for at least five years, accompanied by with an explicit letter of consent from their families. ⁸The symbolic state ownership and control of trans bodies creates a framework of oppression and the majority of trans people are simply forced to eschew this difficult task.

⁷Winter, Sam, “Lost in transition: transgender people, rights and HIV vulnerability in the Asia-Pacific Region”, United Nations Development Programme (2012), accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/hiv/aids/UNDP_HIV_Transgender_report_Lost_in_Transition_May_2012.pdf

⁸Asia Catalyst, My Life is too Dark to see the Light: A Survey of the Living Conditions of Transgender Female Sex Workers in Beijing and Shanghai (2015), accessed February 15, 2017, <http://asiacatalyst.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Asia-Catalyst-TG-SW-Report.pdf>

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For getting a bankcard, they want you to come in personally, and they don't believe I'm the same person. If I don't get the operation, I can't change my ID card, and if I can't change my ID card, what do I do?⁹

Pathologization requirement from a mental health provider, a letter of consent from family members, the need for divorce if married, sterilization and compulsory gender-affirming surgery before legally changing the gender creates an oppressive bureaucratic system of control and functionally and prevents most people from actually achieving that.

Trans people in Mainland China are extremely marginalized by the state, family, and society.

About the consultations

China has witnessed a burgeoning gay and lesbian rights movement in recent years. As an organization dedicated to advancing rights for marginalized communities, and which has worked on LGBT issues extensively, Asia Catalyst has noticed the lack of attention and resources dedicated to trans issues, and trans-led organizations. Advocates from trans communities have expressed an urgent need to foster leadership and strengthen mobilization within the communities.

In order to gather information on the emerging capacity building needs of the trans communities, Asia Catalyst worked with Young Tree, Trans Center, and QHumanity to organize a series of consultation meetings in 2016. The objectives of these consultation meetings were:

1. to identify the legal and social challenges that trans people face in China;
2. to assess the level of trans-led organizations and to understand the capacity building needs of the communities;
3. to identify the prioritize next steps and collaborative actions to advocate for the rights of trans people in China.

⁹Ibid, 28.

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II. METHODOLOGY

Three consultations were organized in 2016 in collaboration with trans-led organizations. Trans leaders were given full autonomy to guide the meeting structure and community members and experienced trans activists provided valuable inputs. These meetings were designed to be evolving opportunities for experienced trans leaders to impart knowledge and explore community issues together.

The first and second consultations took place in Beijing, and the third in Ningbo, Zhejiang province. Trans-led organizations were invited to advise, create, and lead all core consultation exercises in the first and second consultations. The third consultation was a two-day summit and sessions were led by various facilitators.

Consultation	First consultation	Second consultation	Third consultation
Dates	September 2016	November 2016	December 2016
Participants	Trans men and assigned female at birth trans people	Trans women and assigned male at birth trans people	Trans people in general
Location	Beijing	Beijing	Ningbo
People	7	16	24
Length	One day	One day	Two days
Ratio of activists and community members	Half of the participants were experienced activists	A quarter of the participants were experienced activists	Mostly activists and advocates
Trans partner organization / co-host / guest organization	Young Tree (Beijing, China)	Anonymous	Trans Center (Guangzhou, China) and TGEU (Europe)

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The participants were recruited through a combination of open call and direct invitation. An online registration form was developed in order to reach community members who have limited activism experience, and was disseminated within trans communities via WeChat and QQ (two of the most popular social media platforms in China). In total, 40 applications were received: 10 for the first consultation, 19 for the second consultation, and 11 for the third consultation. In addition, 13 activists were invited directly for the third consultation. For the online applications, selection was conducted based on a set of criteria: the completion of applications, willingness to engage, and geographic diversity.

All consultations aimed at bringing in as many diverse participants as possible. The third consultation differed from the first two, as it was mainly for trans activists and advocates with the exception of seven people from the communities who showed great willingness to join. In contrast, the first and second consultations intended to invite and inspire as many community members as possible.

Consultations were mainly based on participatory methods¹⁰ and community-informed models. Organizers who were cis and/or non-Chinese encouraged community members to take the lead in the consultation design, planning, outreach, and processes. At the beginning of each consultation, the program and the role of the cis organizers was introduced as catalysts but not active participants, and discussion was opened for the participants to ask any questions about the program. All core sessions in the consultations were led by community members.

As none of the initial organizers was trans themselves, every consultation had a trans community partner organization with whom to work. The program for each of the consultations was developed in consultation with the community partner organizations. The third consultation had two hosts of the consultation, Trans Center, and QHumanity, while a representative of Transgender Europe (TGEU) provided training and advice.

¹⁰Minkler, Meredith, and Nina Wallerstein, eds., "Community-based participatory research for health: From process to outcomes," John Wiley & Sons (2011).

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The last part of this report provides a general list of recommendations for funders, donors, NGOs, and trans organizations working or planning to work with Chinese trans communities.

Participants Demographics

A total of 43 people participated in the three consultations, out of which four activists participated in both the second and the third consultations. Since the report is dedicated to trans communities in Mainland China, the three participants who are not Mainland Chinese are not counted in this section. The charts below demonstrate the distribution of gender identities, locations of residence, and previous involvement in activism among the 40 participants.

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Chart 1: Distribution of Gender Identities

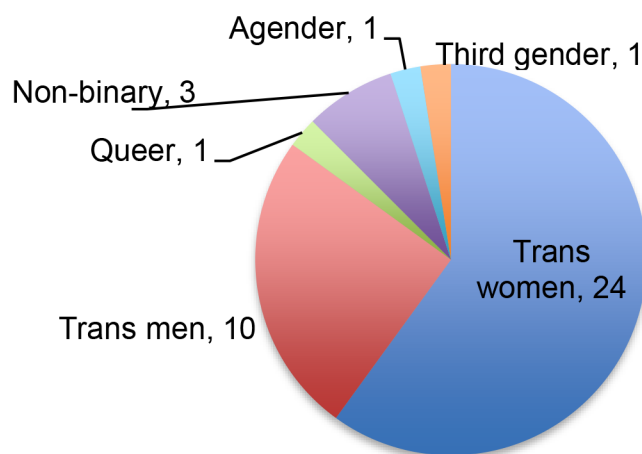
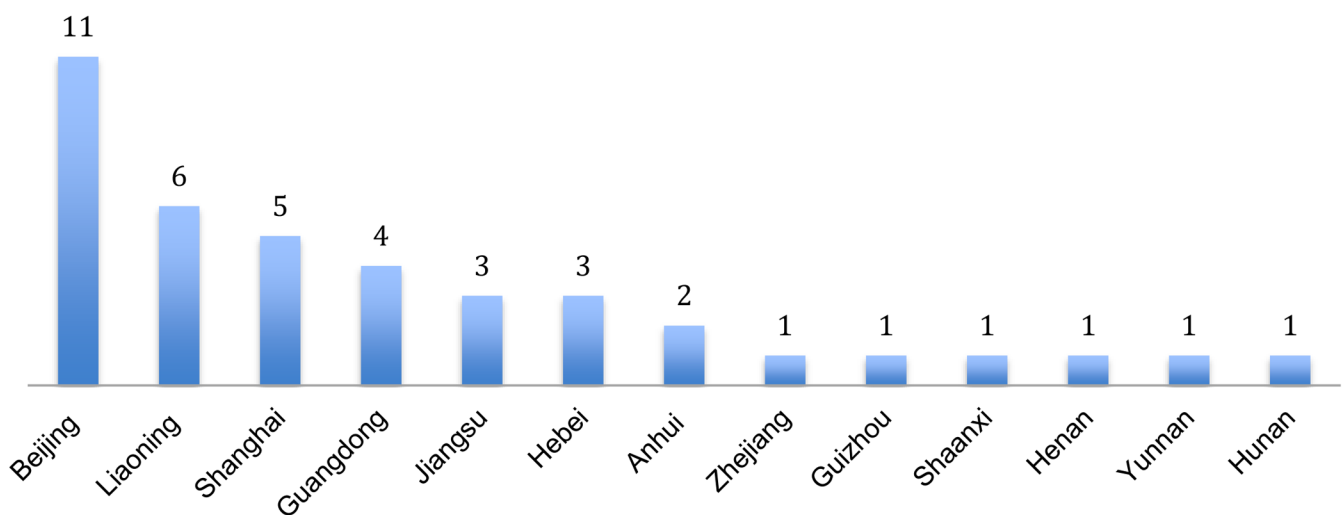


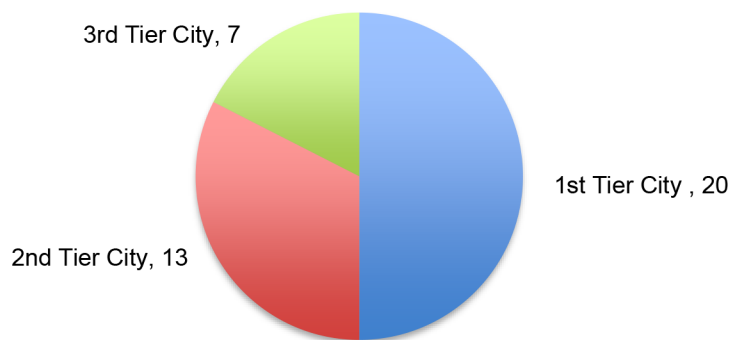
Chart 2: Location of Residence by Province and Municipality



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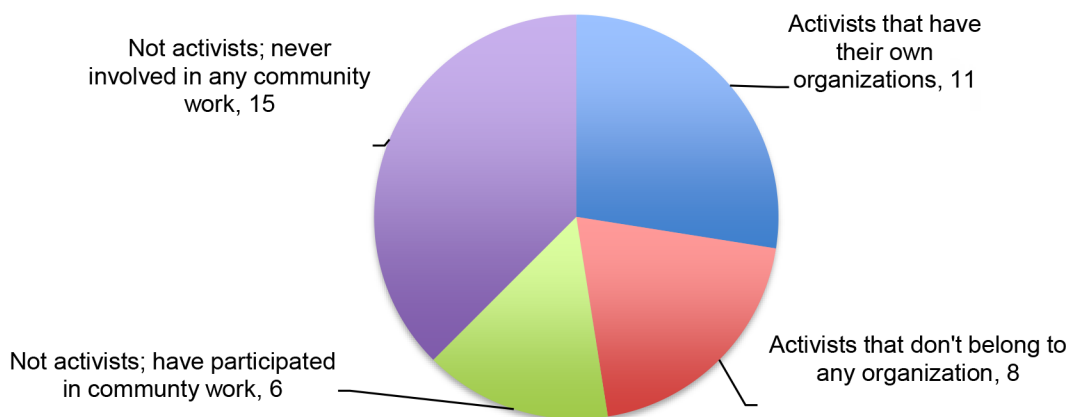
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Chart 3: Locations of Residence by City



Note: Tier systems are widely used to classify Chinese cities. The cities are classified into four tiers according to notions such as population, economic size, and political ranking. First tier cities include Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Second tier cities include Chengdu, Chongqing, Dalian, etc. All other cities are classified as third or fourth tier.

Chart 4: Previous Involvement in Activism



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Confidentiality

The organizers of the community consultation prioritized discussing strategies for maintaining participant confidentiality.

The organizers and participants first discussed confidentiality, safe space, communal agreements, and whether to allow the use of pictures and videos. It was not required that participants disclose their gender identity. Each member was made aware that they could leave the session should they feel uncomfortable at any point. Communal agreements were reached, to ensure that all participants felt comfortable throughout the sessions. A safe space exercise generated rules about taking pictures and videos as well as their use. The third session did not have a photo/video exercise as participants agreed that all pictures and videos should be taken only with explicit consent of the participants. Before each meeting, a social event was organized, inviting all the participants and local LGBT organizations to an informal gathering for them to meet and network with each other.

Challenges

In order to recruit participants for the consultations, application forms were circulated through WeChat and QQ. The first consultation experienced difficulty in recruiting enough participants, as some people were hesitant to attend for not knowing or trusting the organizers. Therefore, confirmed participants were encouraged to recommend other people. As one of the main purposes of the consultations was to inspire new trans activists and advocates, it meant that many people, especially within the first two consultations, were only recently learning about the movement and preferred to attend but not make any commitments.

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III. FINDINGS

The three community consultations addressed challenges faced by the communities, as well as community resilience, needs, and constructive ideas. The first and second consultations focused on individual and community needs, while the third focused on community and leadership needs. The first and second consultations were smaller in order to broaden the network and build trust between the organizers and the communities taking part in consultations. The third consultation provided training on self-care and advocacy strategies to tackle the legal and policy barriers faced by trans people. This consultation began with self-introduction and a safe-space session, aiming at creating a secure environment for all participants to be able to freely share their thoughts and engage in discussions. The agenda was composed of three main sections: 1) identify the priority challenges faced by trans people in China; 2) discover what actions are needed to tackle the issues; and 3) what capacities are required for individuals and community leaders to take these actions.

The meetings served as a platform for trans people to voice their concerns and needs. They shared their everyday life challenges, and highlighted the lack of channels to advocate for their rights. The meetings were an attempt to capture the living situation of trans people in China, explore ways for the communities themselves to confront those challenges, and understand the needs of community members and leaders.

A number of major themes arose during the consultations. The themes outlined below emerged across consultations most frequently and were the most pressing or important to the communities. Issues presented below are categorized by theme related to the forms of institutionalized and social discrimination trans people face.

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Health

Health issues came up very strongly in all three consultations. Regarding healthcare: mental health, and physical transition issues dominated the discussions.

Issues raised concerning gender-affirming healthcare:

- Lack of hormone safety and regulation
- Exorbitant hormone prices
- Negative side effects of hormones
- Lack of accurate medical information about hormones
- Lack of comprehensive information about surgeries
- Expensive surgical procedures
- Complicated postoperative self care
- Gender-affirming surgeries not standardized nationally
- Discrimination and denial of service for trans people who were assigned female at birth while seeking gynecological care
- Lack of trans inclusive general healthcare in hospitals

Almost all participants had obtained their hormones via what they call “grey channels”. Having hormones prescribed by a doctor was not an option for many, and most have either experienced negative effects of self-prescribed hormones themselves or heard dreadful stories from their friends. Many participants had experience of taking hormones without fully understanding their side effects. When purchasing hormones, they ran into a legal conundrum: they know many hormones on the so-called “black market” are fake, but buying hormones from official websites also proved to be difficult.

The hormones they sell on websites abroad are very cheap, but if you buy hormones yourself, you then have to pay for transportation, and customs fees, and customs tax - all those random fees - and the price gets really high.

-Trans man participant

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Participants were clear about needing more professional information on gender-affirming surgeries, and had little trust in local domestic hospitals.

The carrot story: do you folks know this story? It was this hospital; it does most of the operations in China. And then there was a sister¹¹ who, after finishing the operation... Well, you know, there are vagina dilators, and then they told her to use a carrot. But then if you get the operation abroad, they give you three dilators.”

-Trans woman participant

There were several transition-related questions that came up among trans men in terms of where and how to freeze their ovaries, and voice feminization among trans women.

Mental health was a prominent issue as well. During the second consultation, many trans women shared a common concern over health problems in the community. Many of the trans women they knew have depression, and suicide is commonplace. When facing strong external pressures, they stressed how important it is to ensure that there is plenty of mental health support. But finding a suitable mental health specialist from whom to seek support proved to be a challenge on its own.

People like us can easily go to extremes. I was very depressed recently. A friend of mine, who is also trans, worried that I might commit suicide. Peer support has been very instrumental for me. Without them, I would not have pulled it through.

-Trans woman participant

In many of the cases described, specialists tried to convince their trans patients that they are ill and, in some cases, “treat” them.

¹¹“Sister” is a word oftentimes used in China to address or refer to another trans woman.

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The elders at home invited superstitious Tao masters to expel the 'evil spirits' in me. In the past, the masters would kill wild animals and make me eat them, and now they use boiled tea with magic figures drawn by the masters. Then my parents would add other things to it, like dates, to make me drink the magic water.

- Trans woman participant

Overall, the lack of access to appropriate, accurate medical information about gender-affirming healthcare is evident. Many participants had the experience of taking hormones from unreliable sources, were not sure where to access information about the correct dosage of hormones, did not know how to determine if hormones were real or fake, and had spent exorbitant sums of money in purchasing them.

Family

Family was a topic that emerged in many conversations. Families hold power over trans children, as their signature is needed for many administrative documents, such as authorization for gender-affirming surgeries, and, frequently, the moving of the hukou (Chinese household registration). Apart from the administrative part of their children's lives, parents directly affect their wellbeing.

The most common worries mentioned were:

- Family and social pressure and discrimination
- Family member signature required for surgeries consent forms
- Domestic violence
- Family member threats of violence upon completion of a gender-affirming surgery
- Abandoning underage trans children
- Forcibly withdrawing underage children from school

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We need to educate our parents about transgender related knowledge. Some people have misunderstandings due to lack of knowledge. There are PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and we can also set up similar associations. My parents don't have people to talk about this issue, neither are they willing to. The less they talk about it, the less they know. Another thing is that, we need to be independent from parents. If they see we can have a good life as a trans person, they would support me. The reason that they don't support me is because they know I will face injustice and have a hard life.

-Trans woman participant

Some parents would seek doctors who would try to “cure” their children, in the belief that being trans is a disease or abnormal. In some cases, parents were lucky to find gender-affirming mental health specialists, but many, not accepting their advice, insisted that their children should be “treated.” Parents would continue to look for a doctor who would agree to “help” their children or would even turn to traditional religious “treatments.” Two participants in the second consultation had taken local “magic water” made by village shamans from different animal materials. Parents were also found to hold a common belief that their child was not trans but, instead, had too many trans friends who led them astray.

The consultations also touched upon some extremely grave cases of domestic violence. Some of the most tragic stories shared concerned trans youth. All participants had heard about or encountered trans people under 18 years old who had been threatened, blackmailed, and/or beaten by their families and who, in some cases, had to run away or were forced to leave home.

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While temporary shelters run mostly by trans activists hoping to provide a safe and supportive space for the communities were open to these children, it is critical to promote a healthy understanding among families about evidence-based healthcare and to train trans activists to interpret and use the law to protect and support trans youth.

Education

Factors that contribute to the difficulty of accessing education were raised in all three consultations. These include:

- Difficulty for trans youth to complete secondary education
- Prejudiced teachers and professors who lack awareness and knowledge on SOGIE
- Disrespect and discrimination from teachers
- Perception of trans students as less capable than other students by default
- Legally impossible to change gender marker on education certificates

There was overall agreement on the need to create safe spaces in schools. Discrimination, namely verbal, physical abuse, and bullying against trans youth was common. Participants stressed the need to change the schools' approach to trans-related issues. Participants also highlighted the difficulty for legal gender recognition on academic certificates. There are no clear procedures for changing gender markers on diplomas, and many trans people's experiences have showed that it is nearly impossible to do so. Having a diploma stating the wrong gender impacts an individual's ability to carry out basic daily activities, such as seeking employment and pursuing further education.

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Employment

I am working in a state-owned company. It is a very conservative environment, which makes it impossible for me to come out. I know that if I was to come out as trans I would lose my job immediately.

-Trans woman participant

Key issues discussed included:

- Fear of having one's trans identity disclosed to an employer
- Extra difficulties in accessing job opportunities
- Discrimination in the workplace
- Lack of possibility to rectify gender marker in official educational documents

It is very difficult to find a job. I had interviewed for cleaning jobs in hotels but they all rejected me because I am trans. I am currently working on my driving license and I plan to drive taxi in the future. I think finally nobody will discriminate me if I work as a taxi driver, right?

-Trans woman participant

Most companies are set in a binary structure where transphobia is pervasive. Many participants described that they were poor, did not know how to look for a job, and were scared of being discriminated against when looking for a job. One trans woman mentioned that she would only come out in her office job once she reached a stable position of power in her company. Days after the consultation, her company was restructuring and she was scared that the new administrative staff would ask for her university degree, which has a different name on it. One trans man had started to work in his company and transitioned when on the job, though the company still registered him as a woman. Education and employment were core challenges for the participants, and many of them felt they could do something to improve the situation. Due to the difficulties in finding and keeping formal employment, many participants mentioned facing financial problems.

Legal issues

Law was a topic that provoked outrage from the participants, given the multiple legal “vicious cycles” in Chinese law that complicate the lives of trans people. Current law only allows the change of one's gender marker upon the completion of a set number of gender-affirming surgeries, regardless of whether they are wanted by the individual.

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Additionally, the surgeries are only accessible with the consent of one's parents, independently of the trans person's age, and gender markers on university diplomas cannot be changed.

These are just a few examples of the everyday difficulties that trans people face in China. Participants shared many other experiences of their “fights” against the medical, educational, labor, and social systems, in which their identities and needs were mostly non-existent. One trans woman concluded a heated discussion on the legal status of trans people:

Actually, the core problem is that while the law is transparent, we are a group of people that do not exist in law. So, all the issues we face are pushed to the side to some other issues. This is what created the reasons for the very difficult situation that we are in now.

Key issues discussed included:

- Difficulties in changing legal gender marker and name in official documents
- Lack of anti-discrimination legislation
- Single people who were assigned female at birth are not allowed to freeze ovaries
- Lack of autonomy when accessing gender affirming surgeries
- Difficult access to hormones
- Lack of protection for trans sex workers in the law
- Lack of training on how to use existing laws to protect trans youth
- Misgendering in prisons
- Sexual harassment in prisons
- Lack of rights to access gender-affirming health services in public hospitals

One core problem is the challenge of legally changing the gender marker and name on official documents: Chinese national ID card, university diploma, etc.. This causes difficulties when renting a house, finding a job, providing proof of higher education, opening a bank account, and checking into a hotel, for example. It complicates most aspects of a trans person's life.

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Difficulties in acquiring and transporting hormones were also commonplace. Some participants shared second-hand experiences from their work with trans sex workers:

In our work, we have encountered some trans sex workers. They are not held [by the police] for long, maybe just about half a month. But a big part of the people, for example, will give some money, and they will let you out early. But then we have also encountered some trans sisters who are harassed by men. Yeah, there's a lot of that. Also, there is humiliation and shouting by other prisoners and guards; and then there is violence, and then there is sexual harassment. Because the way they look and the things they wear, and there are different kinds of discrimination.

-Trans woman participant

Several participants pointed out the problem of requiring families to consent to and sign gender-affirming surgeries request forms. Forging parents' signatures or going abroad to access these services is common, and lack of official access to gender-affirming surgeries creates risk of self-injury and self-mutilation, as many trans people resort to going to unofficial clinics and/or undertaking risky and unregulated procedures.

Although changing one's name and gender marker and undergoing gender-affirming surgeries in Mainland China are legal "on paper"¹², the reality is that, due to bureaucratic procedures, it is very difficult to access these services. No anti-discrimination laws are in place to specifically protect trans people from abuses, and although there are laws that can be used to protect trans youth from abusive families, more training for transgender people on how to apply them is needed. While there are no laws protecting people on the grounds of gender identity, a few cases have been successfully lodged based on other criteria.

¹²"Biànxìng shǒushù jìshù guǎnlǐ guīfàn" 变性手术技术规范（试行）[Sex change technology management standardization], accessed March 16, 2017<http://www.moh.gov.cn/mohyzs/s3585/200911/44592.shtml>

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One example is the case of a trans man's workplace discrimination lawsuit¹³. He was fired from his workplace after just one week for wearing "men's clothes"; he was allegedly told that it was unacceptable. He lost the case, and only a small compensation granted.

Social attitudes

Participants felt that social attitudes are generally extremely hostile towards the trans community. These attitudes include:

- Negative media coverage of trans-related issues
- Media curiosity about trans lives but lack of respect and understanding when reporting
- Difficulty in accessing gender-segregated facilities, such as swimming pools, public bathrooms, etc, in accordance to gender identity
- Difficulties in establishing or maintaining intimate relationships due to social pressure

Social attitudes make it hard for the participants to navigate conversations with the media. They often found that, even when media outlets reach out to them, often the journalists - wittingly or unwittingly - use offensive language and distort the original story. This was a major concern of many participants and these issues need to be highlighted.

The most common offensive mistakes that the media outlets make are:

- Referring to a person by their sex assigned at birth, e.g. "trans woman is a man wanting to become/has become a woman."
- Misgendering trans people, particularly using wrong pronouns

¹³Yao, Christy, "Chinese transgender man wins landmark wrongful dismissal case," The Guardian, January 3, 2017, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/03/transgender-man-in-china-wins-wrongful-dismissal-case>.

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- Using outdated terminologies to describe trans-related issues, such as the use of “biological sex” when referring to “sex assigned at birth” (see sex assigned at birth in terminology)
- Talking about the specifics of genital surgery as a landmark of transition. Transitioning is a unique and individual journey. Many trans people will consider that they have transitioned from the point they start living publicly in their gender identity. Others may use the term to describe a longer period of time that encompasses some form of physical transition¹⁴(see transition in terminology)

Participants highlighted the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms as one of the biggest obstacles in public spaces. Some described that they have been harassed when using public bathrooms compliant with their gender identities; many abstained from going to the bathroom when outside of home, which has led to negative health consequences to some of the participants.

Also, most participants stated it was particularly difficult for them to find love. One trans man in his early thirties explained:

All the girlfriends I had left me because I am trans.

During the third consultation, the participants discussed how hard it was to find and maintain a romantic relationship. They suggested that increasing trans visibility was crucial to improving social attitudes toward trans people.

Capacity building needs

During the three consultations, community members and those active in organizations showed high levels of self-reflection and clearly defined and articulated the difficulties they faced and the capacity-building needs they had.

¹⁴UNDP and Asia-Pacific Transgender Network (APTAN), Blueprint for the Provision of Comprehensive Care For Trans People and Trans Communities in Asia and the Pacific (2015), accessed March 1, 2017, http://www.healthpolicyproject.com/pubs/484_APTBFINAL.pdf

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While consultation participants agreed that it is very challenging to be trans, they demonstrated strength and resilience and a commitment to diversity and change. Many are fluent in social media, often accept interviews, have strong bonds with their local and online trans groups, organize events, and create organizations to serve trans people. Some participants are community organizers who support trans youth and take part in national and international conferences.

Despite the existence of community work, we identified some gaps between their capacities and their personal and organizational aims. Below are the capacity-building needs that were defined during the three meetings:

Capacity Building Needs of Individuals	Capacity Building Needs of Leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Job training ▪ Better understanding of hormones and surgeries ▪ Better understanding of the law ▪ Advice on how to come out ▪ Staying positive and controlling mood swings ▪ Staying motivated ▪ Facing discrimination ▪ Dating app for romantic relationships and friendships ▪ Trans “PFLAG,” a group to support parents of trans people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advocacy skills ▪ Fundraising skills ▪ Funding search skills ▪ Activity (offline and online) organizing skills ▪ Public speaking skills ▪ Marketing skills ▪ Employee and volunteer management skills ▪ Community empowerment and motivation skills ▪ Emergency rescue training and resources

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings show an extreme level of marginalization and discrimination against trans communities. It is clear that, while there are some legal channels to access healthcare for trans people, huge gaps remain, and the lack of family support and social pressures impede and constrain these efforts. Trans people exist in a legal “grey area.” On the bright side, trans communities are more aware, organized, and ready to learn and develop strategies and solutions than before.

The next section of this report introduces recommendations based on the capacity building needs identified by consultation participants. They came up with a list of ideas for helping trans communities, most of which are short- to mid-term solutions for the most pressing problems, such as ensuring access to healthcare, education, and employment.

Many participants wanted adequate, targeted, and evidence-based information on the correct use of hormones and the safest channels for obtaining them. During the third consultation, one of the TGEU-facilitated sessions referred to Chinese-language trans resources and introduced the “Blueprint for the Provision of Comprehensive Care for Trans People and Trans Communities in Asia and the Pacific.”¹⁵

The participants also discussed the need to locate “safe” doctors for gender-affirming health services. One of the short- to mid- term ideas was to create a safe space map of healthcare professionals in Mainland China. Long-term solutions included addressing prejudices and misinformation among healthcare providers, including gender-affirming healthcare into medical schools’ curriculum, and developing trainings for healthcare providers.

Education was another pressing problem, and participants suggested including sexual and gender diversity training for teachers, either as individual initiatives or government projects.

¹⁵UNDP and Asia-Pacific Transgender Network (APTN), Blueprint for the Provision of Comprehensive Care For Trans People and Trans Communities in Asia and the Pacific (2015), accessed March 1, 2017, http://www.healthpolicyproject.com/pubs/484_APTBFINAL.pdf

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The need for a better understanding of SOGIE by school administration, universities, and teachers, professors, etc. is of paramount importance.

Employment was an issue that, on many occasions, caused heated discussions among consultation participants. Many solutions were proposed: renting a place and turning it into technical skills training center, finding employers that would provide simple jobs like food delivery to trans people, as well as bigger ideas such as creating trans-friendly employment platforms and mobilizing funds that would support trans entrepreneurs. On the other hand, participants also stressed the importance of creating spaces for learning new skills when not employed.

Participants of the first consultation addressed the need to change the larger social structures that cause discrimination in the workplace by encouraging non-discrimination laws and conducting public advocacy.

Recommendations for trans leadership capacity building

- Work together with experienced trans advocates to train Chinese trans leaders in skills and knowledge needed to be able to advocate effectively on behalf of trans communities in country.
- Facilitate training sessions with experienced trans fundraisers to explore the different ways in which money for trans projects can be raised. At the same time, provide core fundraising skills in developing budgets, project language fluency, and establishing and maintaining relationships with funders and donors.
- Provide professional training on organizational management and community empowerment.
- Build confidence and provide trainings on giving public speeches, dealing with the media, and effectively communicating the work and objectives of their activism.
- Offer guidance in organizing social activities and events, both on- and offline.
- Develop connections between local trans organizations and emergency shelters, while providing trainings to the shelters in dealing with vulnerable populations.

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Recommendations for individual capacity building

- Create spaces and support systems focused on the wellbeing of trans individuals and on building resilience while navigating a transphobic world.
- Encourage grassroots groups to get their families involved and connect with each other in order to provide mutual support and potentially create a trans-affirming network for their children.
- Facilitate instances in which trans people can learn about the laws and regulations that may affect them.
- Disseminate available resources that provide evidence-based information and guidance about trans-related healthcare.
- Develop trainings in order to facilitate the inclusion of trans people in the labor market.

Recommendations for an intersectional approach

This project and report aim at incorporating multiple trans perspectives and acknowledges its own limitations in doing so. We aspire to maintain an intersectional approach. Below are suggestions based on our experiences:

- Make sure specific needs of trans people from rural areas, elderly, youth, sex workers, ethnic minorities, disabled, among others, are taken into consideration when developing projects.
- Ensure that there are always trans people in all decision-making processes.
- Incorporate issues of race, class, disability, language, education, sexual orientation, and others into the discussions.
- Guarantee that all people involved in the projects should be informed and knowledgeable of the most updated trans-related resources available.

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Recommendations for regional and international collaboration

We observed that Chinese trans organizations seem to be generally isolated from regional and global initiatives, and most local groups are not aware of their existence. There is an urgent need to create a bridge that would allow trans activists to be part of, contribute to, and learn from the global trans movement, as well as the advocacy strategies and resources that may come with it. Following are some suggestions for moving forward:

- Encourage partnerships between local organizations and regional/international/global networks, organizations, and associations, e.g. Asia and Pacific Transgender Network (APTN), the Global Action for Trans* Equality (GATE), and the Transgender Professional Association for Transgender Health (TPATH).
- Identify common goals that could be tackled through joint projects and initiatives.
- Facilitate the organizing of joint meetings, seminars, workshops, and other activities in identified subjects of common interest for trans-led groups.
- Develop exchange programs to which local trans leaders can apply and work on other organizations' projects abroad.

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ORGANIZATIONS IN CHINA FOCUSING ON TRANS ISSUES

China has seen an increased number of trans-led organizations working on trans-related issues in recent years. While not comprehensive, the list below highlights some of the organizations that would like to be listed in this report as a resource.

Young Tree (Beijing): volunteer group dedicated to empowering female-assigned trans and gender non-conforming people in China. In order to bring trans health issues to light, Young Tree has created a documentary on a trans person's bilateral mastectomy experience, which is planned to be screened in 20 cities across China. The documentary approaches the topic of gender through the lens of a life story, aiming to raise public awareness on trans issues, as well as create the space for an informed dialogue on gender diversity and gender justice.

Transgender Aid and Counseling Center (Nanjing): service-based organization offering short-term shelter for trans people, introducing trans-affirming medical services, as well as hosting community events. The shelter program focuses on community members who are victims of domestic violence after coming out to their families, and those who become homeless due to unemployment for being trans. The shelter is a temporary safe space for trans people in need, while the organization provides them with job-seeking advice.

Translife: organization that provides trans communities in China with knowledge and skills to solve challenges in their daily life. Translife owns a media platform, organizes support groups, offers medical, psychological, and legal transferal services, and publishes handbooks on trans-related issues. It also provides in-person job-hunting training, which includes topics such as writing CVs, taking interviews, and changing diplomas and IDs. Translife's training respond to the urgent needs from the communities by enhancing their practical skills in employment settings.

Trans Center (Guangzhou): Trans Center is a trans-led feminist organization founded in May 2016. Trans Center is committed to advocating for the rights and interests of diverse trans communities, opposing violence targeting trans people, and empowering trans communities. community events in Guangzhou,

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Trans Center holds regular community events in Guangzhou, gives public lectures, and has established Trans Voice, an online WeChat group for sharing stories of trans people. Trans Center also supplies emergency housing, safe space, and legal advice for those facing severe violence, especially domestic violence targeting trans children and youth. They seek to build a strong trans movement in China through facilitating the creation of new trans groups across the country by providing training, support, resources, and advice. Trans Center has also started a trans hot line that serves community members, their families, and loved ones in Mandarin and Cantonese.

LESGO (Suzhou): LESGO is a women-led, entirely volunteer-based LGBTQ organization established in December 2010. As of today, LESGO boasts over 100 members that continue to actively serve the needs of LGBTI people. They particularly pay attention to building pluralistic and participatory approaches to realize their missions. 2 out of their 9 core members, who are decision makers, are trans. LESGO regularly organizes events particularly focusing on trans-related issues, including, but not limited to, a weekly live show hosted by two trans members, a scene of stage play discussing about trans discrimination in workplace, inviting trans members from the community to tell their stories and give lectures, supporting trans members to communicate with their families, and on-line campaigns about trans rights.

Trans Support Network in Northeast China (Shenyang): The organization focuses on trans sex workers' health and legal issues. Their work includes providing HIV-related services, distributing condoms and lubricant, helping trans sex workers living with HIV to obtain basic living allowances, introducing medical providers to gender-affirming health services, as well as holding legal workshops for the communities and offering legal aid for those in need.

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About Asia Catalyst

Asia Catalyst builds strong civil society and advances rights for marginalized groups in Asia. We train community-based organizations (CBOs) to meet high standards of effective and democratic governance, to establish a stable foundation for future growth, and to conduct rigorous human rights research and advocacy.



This report was developed by Asia Catalyst in collaboration with Trans Center, QHumanity, and Young Tree in an effort to understand the needs of Mainland China's trans communities and to inform a curriculum development strategy. It summarizes results of three community consultations held with trans people in 2016.

The meetings served as a platform for trans people to voice their concerns and needs. They shared their everyday life challenges, and highlighted the lack of channels to advocate for their rights. A number of major themes arose during the consultations including health, family, education, employment, etc.

The findings show an extreme level of marginalization and discrimination against trans communities. While there are some legal channels to access healthcare for trans people, huge gaps remain, and the lack of family support and social pressures impede and constrain these efforts. Trans people exist in a legal "grey area." On the bright side, trans communities are more aware, organized, and ready to learn and develop strategies and solutions than before.